imperfect life

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by Drac

Summary

There had been five bodies, and George remembers - cannot forget - the shape they'd traced, the inverted constellation across the pale rock. Armitage had not shot two men.

Scenes from the Mutineers' camp, and from the past, from Oxfordshire, from Eton. Lieutenant Hodgson has regrets, but can still recall a perfect moment.

Notes

all my thanks and love to notthebees and vegetas for seeing me through this - it's been a labour of love, but I don't think I'd have made it without you.

This is loosely set in the same slight AU as take heart? But there's basically no cross-over. Good luck and godspeed.

A tiny part of this deals with uncomfortable romantic/sexual experimentation between teens at boarding school. If you don't want to read that, please don't. Beyond that, the ordinary Terror warnings for everyone dies, Victorian ethnic epithets, scurvy & cannibalism. See you on the other side.

See the end of the work for more notes

His head hurts - his face, and his jaw, and his teeth, and he has no idea where he is. He was sure - *sure*, that when that horrible thing had charged at the gallows, that he'd started toward the tents; but the fog had been so thick that he must have gotten turned around, and he can't seem to tell any direction from another, and however he's done it, he's ended up entirely alone.

He's sitting in a slight dip in the undulating and endless gravel, contemplating which part of which boot he should eat - Sir John had eaten his boots, and lived to tell the tale, so it seems... maybe - it might keep him going until he stumbles across someone. He lost his notebook in the commotion, which is a real shame, because its thick leather cover would have made a preferable meal over - his damn boots.

At least the fog has cleared, and coming over a ridge he can hear - oh! The scrape of runners over rock, he gains a sense of direction for the first time in hours, scrambles to get his boot back on and run as fast as he can toward -

'Lieutenant, what a miracle!'

- Mister Hickey. Oh no.

Tozer, he expects; that he'd bring along his Marines makes sense - young Des Voeux is more of a surprise, and Misters Diggle and Goodsir are clearly more prisoners than party, but it's Gibson who gives him pause.

'*Gibson*,' he says, with all the disappointment he can muster, 'these are the men you'd throw in with? *These* are your fellows?'

Gibson looks away guiltily, and it's the damnable Hickey who replies -

'We don't need to keep you with us, Lieutenant. Give a couple of days, a week, Crozier might come through here. I can retract my olive branch, if you'd prefer - or if you'd rather abuse my crew.'

He would, in all honesty, quite like to give Hickey's crew the dressing-down of a lifetime - but he's so *cold,* and they let him drink water, so he clings to the rotted olive branch with all of his might.

They're almost all Terrors, Hickey's party, of those voluntary members, an even split of Marines and stewards - all of the damn stewards, besides poor Genge, who is dead, Jopson, who is a lieutenant, and Bridgens, who has become a nurse. The rest of them stand, a motley assemblage of lanky, traitorous boys. Not a one of them will meet his eyes - he, Diggle and Goodsir put the tent they'll sleep in up together. He feels... abandoned.

When George is seven, his parents take his brother to Switzerland, and George can't come. He cries for hours; the whole carriage ride from Wimbledon to Oxford, when his father knocks on the door, when Aunt Kate straightens his collar, and Aunt Louisa gives him her

handkerchief. They're old - not *his* aunts but his father's - his *great*-aunts, but there's no other family who could take him for so long. Mother pecks his cheek and Father pats his shoulder, and James, wan but bright-eyed, says, 'I'll see you soon, Georgie!'

'I'll miss you,' says George, mopping his face with Aunt Louisa's handkerchief - one of his aunts' servants collects his luggage from the cab, and Aunt Kate looks concerned.

'Won't you stay for dinner?' she says as George's family go back to the carriage, 'Henry?' but she's talking to Father, not whoever *Henry* is - Father shakes his head -

'We're catching the nine o'clock ferry, Auntie. George, you be good.'

'Of course, Father. I'm - You'll come back?'

'*George*.'

'You'll come back for me?'

'We're not going forever. We'll come back for you.'

George nods, still scrubbing his face, and watches them wave at him from the carriage window until they're out of sight, until he can no longer hear the horse's hooves upon the cobbled street, until it seems like his parents and his brother James are gone forever. Aunt Kate leads him back indoors with a gentle hand upon his shoulders.

Aunt Kate and Aunt Lou are... nice, in the end. Aunt Kate plays the virginal, and she teaches George too. She has a suitor, called Mister Weston, and when Mister Weston visits, Aunt Lou takes George out. One week-end she takes him all the way down to Southampton to see the Victory; a beautiful ship, the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

'My nephew Robert was in the Navy,' she tells him, 'that's your father's cousin - your... first cousin once removed.'

'Did he sail here?'

'Not this ship,' she says, 'but one like this. He was at Trafalgar too.'

'Good gosh,' says George, and Aunt Lou smacks him for being a blasphemer.

'Were we all really that bad, Gibson?'

Gibson's managed to avoid him for days since he first found Hickey's party, but as they cluster around Diggle's stove, he has no escape.

'It's not - it's not like that.'

'What is it like?' George asks, 'You and I - you spent three years at Lieutenant Irving's side, and then follow his murderer?'

Gibson looks around, panicked - 'Don't call him that. Cornelius - he doesn't -'

'What would you call it?' says George, and a part of him does, genuinely, want to know.

'I -' Gibson's voice is gravelly with pain, and he rubs at his tired eyes - 'Lieutenant Irving told you all about what happened with -'

'Gibson,' says George, 'what the Devil are you -'

'- about the... after the flogging, I heard him -'

And George says, eloquently, 'What?'

Their duty ends just before the flogging, so after it George and John retire to the Wardroom for a late and especially unappealing dinner. The Captains are arguing on the other side of the wall, though what about George can't be sure.

'Rum business, punishment,' says George, stirring swirls into his congealing oxtail soup, and then, 'Rum business kidnapping that poor Esqui girl.'

'Hm,' says John, who's been distracted and in particularly low spirits even given the current pall over the ship.

George stirs his soup some more, and Gibson leans over his shoulder to top up his port.

'Dirtiness,' George says. 'Dereliction of duty, insubordination, and dirtiness.'

'Yes,' says John, tightly.

'Dirtiness, though,' says George, with a forced chuckle, 'does make you wonder who the other fellow was, after all. Takes two to quarrel and all that - if it didn't I daresay half of the crew would be up against the mast every other day -'

'Lieutenant Hodgson!' John snaps, his spoon clicking against the edge of his dish, and George knows he's made a mistake as soon as the words leave his mouth. He likes John, he really does - but he can be a dreadful bore.

'Sorry, John, sorry - you know I went to boarding school - we tend to -'

'Leave us, Mister Gibson,' says John, looking distressed, and Gibson, in his usual calm manner, says -

'Are you sure, sir?'

'It doesn't do to speculate on these things, Lieutenant - it really doesn't.' John continues, heedless, and George makes eye contact with Gibson and jerks his head at the doorway until he leaves.

'I am sorry, John, it was thoughtless of me, I shan't mention it again -'

'... did I do wrong?' John asks, wet-eyed, and George is, as he often is, quite sincerely apologetic and quite completely confused.

'I don't expect so.' he says.

'I have made the most appalling... Lieutenant, I'm sorry to say that I was the one that found the evidence of Mister Hickey's... his -'

'Dirtiness,' George supplies, helpfully.

'... yes, many months ago, sir. The other man, he -'

'Who? Dispense with the *sir* though, John.'

John dithers for a moment, unsure whether to answer, then mutters, 'The boy Evans, who was killed.'

'Well, that's not your fault.'

'No! Listen to me - he... Guh - Evans, pleaded that I wouldn't shame him, and in doing so I shielded Mister Hickey, do you see?'

'... no.' says George.

'Mister Hickey believes himself above the Articles, and *that* is my fault. That - I protected him from punishment because,' he chokes, 'G-Evans was so frightened, George, and now I fear I've made things much, much worse. For - for him, for all of us.'

'You ought to have told me, or Edward -'

'You were on a lead party, and he - he really didn't want anyone to know. I wouldn't have told you *now* if he hadn't - he... have *I* caused this?'

George gives a low and thoughtful hum, 'I don't think God sends terrible bears to kill ships' boys just because you told a lie, if that's what you mean.'

'It's not,' says John, exasperated, 'I mean, ought I have... turned the two of them in straight away? Reminded Mister Hickey of his place?'

'And also had Evans punished for being abused?' This galls George in a way he can't quite articulate, and he hopes that only the first part of that comes through. John sighs.

'Well, quite. It's always a... balance, isn't it.'

'It is,' George agrees, 'and I think you struck the right one, in the end.'

'Do you think?'

'I do. I think...' George looks back at his soup as John shuffles a handkerchief out of the pocket of his dress jacket, 'it'd weigh on your conscience a great deal more if Evans had been... well, if that bear had got him today *and* you'd had him hauled in front of the crew only a few months prior for daring to be a victim. They were messmates, weren't they? What you ought to have done -'

This only seems to upset John more, and he starts - 'George, I -' but slams his mouth closed as the door slides open and Edward appears.

'Evening,' says Edward, and drops into the closest chair, 'I hope I'm not interrupting?'

John crams his spoon into his mouth in lieu of an answer, shaking his head, so George says, 'Not at all. John and I were just discussing - we'll have to re-assign mess group eight, seeing as, well - Misters Strong and Evans, God rest them.'

Edward huffs an exhausted and mirthless laugh, 'We'll reassign more than that. Every man on this ship wants off. I'm ashamed to say that I'm going to let you deliver that news, John.'

'Only fair,' says George, having gone entirely off of his soup, which he nudges half-heartedly in Edward's direction. 'I've not really touched that, if you want it. I'll go and relieve Hornby, with the Lady Silence.'

'She'll be to Erebus, I expect,' says Edward, drawing a figure-eight in the soup.

'Ah,' says George, 'that is a shame. I do enjoy my chats with her.'

'Captive audience,' Edward jokes, and he tentatively sips at the cold soup, 'you give her my regards - and send a steward over if you spot one, this is awful.'

Gibson rubs his hands together awkwardly. 'The dirtiness,' he says after a moment, 'about Cornelius' dirtiness.'

'About Evans?' asks George, and Gibson laughs aloud.

'Christ,' he says, 'is that what he told you? After all of this time you thought -'

'Gibson?'

'It was me,' says Gibson, miserably, 'it was me that Lieutenant Irving found fornicating with Cornelius.'

'Oh, *Gibson,*' says George, sympathy shot through with horror, 'you ought to have told me.'

'What?' Gibson laughs disbelievingly, '"Lieutenant, thank you so much for securing me this position: I spend my time off duty taking it from the caulker's mate, and I fancy thirty of Mister Johnson's best -"'

'Good God, Gibson! Do you really think that of me? I said to Lieutenant Irving that it was better he protected Mister Evans - I'd say the same for you, and any man forced into a position -'

'Would that I were forced, then, Lieutenant.'

George looks Gibson in the eye, pursing his lips, and finds that he doesn't have an answer.

'- and spare me your sermons,' he continues, standing, 'I'm repenting every day, now.'

He gets a full five paces away before George can find the words - 'With *Mister Hickey*? Of every man upon our ships, *Mister Hickey*?'

Gibson's eyes are full of something, though at this distance George can't say what. He looks down and away, hand going to his chest, and the corner of his mouth turns up fondly. 'With Mister Hickey.' he says.

George's father enrols him at Eton. He's a self-made man, and having completed himself he moves onto his next project, a self-made son. He'd gotten close with James, and having to start afresh must be a miserable bit of business. George doesn't resent it, not really; he has to be a successor to make Father feel a success - and he's read all about boarding school in his Boys' Own Book, and it sounds wonderful. Mostly.

George fags for Archibald Harrington-Thurlowe from the fifth form, whose father is the MP for Reading. Archie is beautiful, elegant and noble-looking, with a long curved face like a borzoi. It's one of the first things George tells him, on one of the first days of school and Archie laughs, elbows his friend and says, 'I love this one,' - which, George learns, is very unusual.

Archie does not, in general, love everyone. He's blessed with that baffling power of the very beautiful to be outrageously popular whilst also being rude, arrogant and aloof. The other boys allow it because they are frightened of him as well as being desperately in love with him and George, tragically, is no different. The thrill of being liked goes straight to his head, and Archie snaps George up like a butterfly collector with a space just his size in the display.

Being Archie's fag isn't bad - it could certainly be worse - everyone hears the horror stories, and Dicky Peters beat his fag blue just for burning the eggs. Archie, on balance, is just fine.

Because it is a balance. Everything is. Archie protects George from Dicky Peters, which is good, and he makes George carry his bags, which is less so. He calls him smart, and pretty, and sometimes brilliant, and he expects two sausages and an egg at half six sharp every morning. Archie kisses his temple (which he likes) and calls him Poppet (which he doesn't) - but he doesn't call any of his other fags Poppet, and he doesn't wake up any of his other fags at two in the morning because the bed's cold, and he doesn't write home to his father about any of the other fags saying 'my very best young friend, Hodgson.'

He gives a huge tip at the end of the year, a whole five sovereigns, and all summer he sends letters about his travels and how excited he is to get back to Godolphin House for his last year.

The new autumn term is bright and beautiful, and over the summer Archie's kisses have changed their trajectory, from his temple to his cheekbone to his lips, and when George springs back from the first one, surprised, he crows - 'Oh George, I didn't steal your first kiss away, did I?'

George has had a first kiss, and a second, and a third, that very summer with a girl from the village called Violet. 'Not to worry, Archie, you just startled me.'

Archie flings himself down upon his bed. 'That wasn't your first kiss? On the lips?' he sounds oddly petulant.

"Fraid not,' says George.

'Well, it wasn't mine either,' says Archie, sitting back up, 'what are you doing?'

'Just my mathematics.' He picks his pen back up, dips and blots before starting on his next exercise.

'You *are* clever,' says Archie, 'I hate mathematics. When I'm Prime Minister, I'll make you Chancellor of the Exchequer, and you can do my sums.'

'I'd rather not. Politics is a bit much for me. I've got to be a self-made man.'

Archie flops back onto his bed. 'Seems a lot of effort,' he says, 'I'm going to work at my father's office, and then I'll become an MP, and then I'll become leader of the Tories, and then I'll become the Prime Minister.'

'That seems pretty complicated itself,' says George, fairly.

'With my father's help, I reckon I'll have my own office before I'm done at Oxford. Doesn’t your father have an industry to break you into?'

'He designs railway bridges,' George sighs. 'I'd like to join the Navy - you know my father's cousin was at Trafalgar -'

'Hah!' says Archie, 'You can't *spit* without hitting a father's cousin who fought at Trafalgar, you silly goose, why on earth would you want to go to sea and be a fag all over again, for some stinking sailor?'

'I wouldn't be fagging -' says George, insulted by the comparison - he puts his pen back down.

'That's what cabin-boys *are*, Georgie! Sea-fags!'

'I'd be a midshipman, Archie, learning navigation and whathaveyou. I'd take my exam, become a Lieutenant -'

'To what end?' says Archie, genuinely puzzled, 'Come out of it in fifty years with no family and no fixed address -'

'I could become an Admiral, eventually. Imagine! Me, making Nelson's Bridge across ships, firing the cannon, discovering new places and peoples -'

Archie yawns, but George pays him no heed -

'- it'd be like school! All of my friends with me all of the time, people who look up to me, boshing rotters -'

'Which rotters?' asks Archie, approaching -

'Well, pirates, I suppose. The French, *Ashantees* -'

'Both of those wars are over now. Must be dreadfully boring once a treaty is signed -'

'Slavers! We'd stop them! And besides, I think it would be simply marvellous to be involved in a treaty being signed, don't you? Changing the world like that?'

'That's why I'm going into politics.' says Archie, yawning again as he takes a seat on the floor next to George's chair, running his fingers atop George's shoe, 'a lot less footwork.'

'You aren't half slack at times,' George says, and Archie laughs, pushing the back of his head into George's knee -

'And *you* aren't half *silly*.'

Hickey doesn't help them haul. Sometimes he puts himself in harness for the pretence of it, but never pulls even enough to put any tension in his rope. It snakes along the ground behind him, as though he were stalked by an adder. In his worst moments, George quite wishes that he was.

They do move quickly - quicker certainly than that last mile with the Captain to the Terror Camp, even though the men then had been spurred on by the promise of a hot meal, and quicker, he hears, than the Captain's party those few miles away now.

'Did you know?' George asks Armitage as they take their turn as guards - George always keeps to Armitage's right to account for his deaf ear, but he still says,

'Pardon?'

'Did you know?' George says again, slightly louder this time, but making sure not to let his voice carry to Hickey where he ambles in his loose harness.

'What do you mean, Lieutenant?' Armitage is another who makes George feel mocked whenever he says his rank. Hickey has taken to calling him *Private*.

'When we climbed that ridge, and saw Mister Hickey there, with Lieutenant Irving and Mister Farr, did you really believe that those Esquimaux had done it?'

'I suppose so, yeah.'

George stares down at his hands. He's not allowed a gun. 'Who did you shoot?' he asks.

'I dunno,' says Armitage, 'the men, I suppose.'

George had shot two men, he's certain of it; he'd picked out the tallest of the group, with white fur trousers, and the one with the beard. They'd fallen forward, hoods obscuring their faces - and then one had run off, and they hadn't the shot to stop him. There had been five bodies, and George remembers - cannot forget - the shape they'd traced, the inverted constellation across the pale rock. Armitage had not shot two men.

George doesn't say that. He says, 'And you went with Mister Hickey's group, after the scene at the gallows? After you knew what he'd tricked us into doing?'

The adrenaline had only worn off halfway back to the camp, their sledges heavy with mutilated friends, and George had thought of the sad eyes of the Tartar soldier he'd stuck back in China - the Tartar soldier who'd got a hit in first, and the palm of his left hand had ached with the memory and, in hindsight, the scurvy. Mister Pocock had been weeping - George remembers that well, and he was very close to tears himself. Poor John. He remembers - that last hour or so of the trek back, when he had begun to worry; he ought to have given a clearer order, ought to have captured those Esquimaux, ought not have let that last escape.

There had only been Lieutenant Little at the camp when he'd gotten back - he'd had to break the news, and watched Edward's stoic shell crack outward like an egg's when they'd lifted John's body onto Doctor Goodsir's table, and then they'd sat beside each other on the camp bed and both wept for their friend, and then Mister Des Voeux had called them from outside, in his usual bored manner, warning that some of the men were getting antsy, and they were.

'I suppose so,' says Armitage, here and now and unbothered, 'we'd made a plan.'

'A plan,' says George, dully. He doesn't know what he'd like to have heard, but it's not that. 'do you suppose we'll get back, following this plan of yours?'

'I wouldn't have gone with if I didn't.'

'What do you think your wife will say, about you mutinying?'

'What do you know about my wife?'

Lieutenant Fitzjames is George's favourite officer on board *Cornwallis* - a young Lieutenant with a bold smile and a head full of dark wavy hair, and George likes him instinctively. They'd been on *Excellent* together, too, though they'd barely crossed paths there, it had been a thrill to have a familiar face with you, and one you know to be competent. Lieutenant

Fitzjames is quite desperate for a lark - he's always regaling the mates with his tales of Syria, joking his way through the gun drills and cannon practises. Watch with Lieutenant Fitzjames is actually kind of fun, even when there's nothing to see.

'I'll give you a tip,' says Lieutenant Fitzjames, wandering the poop deck, 'for when you make Lieutenant - never failed me.'

'Never?'

'Not once - matching a name to a face is not important; a man'll give you his own name with nary a provocation - what you must do is match a piece of information to that name. Never a quicker way to make a man trust you, Hodgson.' he nods at the seaman up the rigging, 'Seaman Clarke is from Bristol.' - the Marine at the stern - 'Sergeant Burrows has a three-year-old son, and Seaman Naylor over there was a butcher's apprentice before signing up.'

'Good Lord,' says George.

'Goes a long way,' says Fitzjames, nodding, 'do you wish to know my fact on you?'

'I'm quite frightened to ask, sir.'

'Well,' says Fitzjames, 'I know you're an Old Boy,' but George's expression must betray him somehow because the Lieutenant's usually open face sort of shutters, and he backpedals, 'and I know *now* that you weren't a fan of the place.'

'Do I make myself so obvious?'

'No! No, not at all - I read it in your recommendation, though, well, nought wrong with not fancying the place. You know my brother - well, my cousin, I suppose, though we were quite raised as brothers - he was at Eton too, while I was a volunteer. Loathed the place, simply *loathed* it. I'm sure he'd be glad to know of another fellow who disliked it. He made it little over a year before he begged my uncle to take him back home.'

George laughs, which he imagines was Fitzjames' plan.

'I made two,' he says, 'years, that is, '30 through '32, then it was straight to sea with me.'

'Quite right of you,' says Fitzjames, and smiles, 'do *you* have a brother?'

'A sister, sir. And I have - I *had* a brother, though he passed away nearer fifteen years ago now - his name was James, also.'

Fitzjames, whose eyes had momentarily bulged as George had said *had*, gives George's shoulder a hearty clap - 'Good strong name, James. My parents liked it so much I got it twice.'

'Yes,' says George, feeling a little awkward. James Fitzjames is a very silly name indeed.

'At any rate,' says Fitzjames, 'you'll be sure to make your name out here. You'll remember me for my advice, now. I find you a very agreeable character, Hodgson, very agreeable. I ought

not tell you this, but I find a few of the others... a little grating, if I'm honest. Old-fashioned. Why a man would go to sea to be like a man ashore is beyond me. I trust you'll be a great hand in the battle - you have to think unconventionally on your feet.'

'Nelson's Bridge,' says George, thoughtfully.

'Exactly! Genius! Simply genius. We're of the same mind, you and I - we ought to stick together.'

'Yes,' says George, looking at the Lieutenant out of the corner of his eye, as though he were the sun itself.

Gibson approaches *him* for once, standing awkwardly in a way that's not just compensating for the hip that pains him -

'I - I wanted to apologise,' he says, 'for my sharpness the other day.'

'Quite alright.'

'No. I - Lieutenant, it's been preying on my mind. You've only ever been kind to me.'

'Can't imagine you'd thank me for that,' says George, watching the sunset brush the horizon and paint the vast expanse of King William pink and orange. Even that's not enough to cast Gibson in any semblance of health.

'I didn't have to follow,' he says, sadly, 'and you couldn't have known.' he sighs. 'We're all beyond blaming anyone but ourselves, now. We should be.'

George takes umbrage with that more than Gibson snapping at him the other day.

'*I* blame Mister Hickey,' he says.

'For the ice?' says Gibson, and he hisses in pain when he sits down.

'You ought to talk to Doctor Goodsir about that,' says George, 'he'll have something for it.'

'For the scurvy?' says Gibson. He's being entirely obstreperous, and George fights the urge to roll his eyes.

George watches from the wheel as the Master sends Seaman Parson and Seaman Gibson up the rigging, and Gibson starts loitering.

It's a beautiful day - the sun high and the sea blue and the coast of China winking green at the horizon to their north while other ships give chase to the south and west. *Wanderer* is lying in wait for reinforcements from HMS *Harlequin* and the East India's *Diana* from the east, and when George turns his sea-dazzled eyes back to the deck he sees Seaman Gibson still

dithering, now talking intensely with Seaman Lawrence. Parson is halfway up the mast already, and he's calling down in frustration.

George approaches them - 'Is there a problem, gentlemen?'

Gibson, twitching, is the first to reply, 'No, sir!' and Lawrence scoffs in disgust, slinging his frayed rope into Gibson's hands.

'I'm off up, Sir. Mind Gibson sorts that, please,' he says, then races to join Parson up the mast. Under his tan and sweaty sheen, Gibson flushes, busying himself with the rope and marlinspike.

'Do you not like to climb, Gibson?'

'I - I'm afraid I don't have much of a head for heights, sir,' Gibson says, face scarlet, and after a moment's pause splutters, 'I can! Climb, sir, if you need me to - I'm simply... better at my other duties.'

George considers this. Lieutenant Fitzjames' advice has never done George wrong, and his mind for faces often does him one better than the Lieutenant could ever have imagined. He says,

'You were rated as Cook when you boarded, Gibson, is that right?'

Gibson looks up - 'It is, sir. I signed on to be a steward but then Thompkins -' he sighs, 'well, I'm almost as good at making soup as I am climbing.'

George laughs, but Gibson simply looks perturbed. He seems to be a serious young chap, and probably well-suited to stewardship - George tells him as much, and Gibson smiles shyly at his shoes.

'Thank you, sir.'

'I'll put in a word for you,' says George, 'once we're done bashing these devils and back in Blighty, you ought to keep an eye for me in the magazine - though whether you'd like to contend with my stockings is another matter entirely, I suppose.'

Gibson laughs nervously and Thank You-s again before George bids him farewell and returns to the wheel, and when he catches Gibson's large pale eyes on him later, he winks.

'Don't *you* blame Mister Hickey?' George asks. Since that first conversation they'd had around Diggle's stove, he's recognised the same spirit-deep chains that bind George and Diggle and Goodsir to the convoy wrapped loose around Gibson too, though he wonders if Gibson would see them that way.

'What for? You said it yourself; it takes two to quarrel.'

'He killed Lieutenant Irving,' says George - really presses the point, 'murdered him in cold blood! You tell me that you can forget that? Can forgive it?'

'No,' says Gibson, 'I can't forgive it. But I - he - he made me feel ... *something*, Lieutenant. And I can't... make that bad in retrospect.'

'He saw you,' says George, and Gibson shakes his head -

'More than that. *You* saw me, and he -'

George raises his eyebrows in prompt -

'I'd fancied myself quite in love with him. I really believed *him* quite in love with *me* - and I set him up, in front of Lieutenant Irving, and so I owe him.'

Gibson isn't looking at him, running his finger along the inside of his collar.

'I should have taken the flogging,' he says, 'I just didn't want to disappoint you, or any of command. What a mess I've made.'

'If he tricked you,' George starts, and Gibson makes an odd noise, almost like a yelp -

'I can't - I can't wipe that out,' he says, 'If it's all I've got - I'd rather... I don't want to die thinking I've never been loved -' he scoffs, then, half-disgusted, 'God, listen to me.' Gibson digs his fingers into his eyes, and sighs hard.

'I haven't forgiven him,' he says again, 'but he *has* forgiven me. For me... that's the best I'll get.'

Summer term - the days are long and the nights are hot, and Godolphin House is terribly well-insulated; it's suffocating even with the big sash windows opened to their limits.

'You'll miss me when I'm at university,' says Archie, sat at the foot of his bed, shirtless, while George lounges on top of the sheets, 'I'll miss *you*, you know.'

'Aw,' says George, shuffling, 'I *will* miss you.'

'Though you'll have your own fag to boss around next year.'

'Oh,' says George, 'I don't think I'd *boss*.'

Archie laughs, pushing himself up onto the bed, and kisses George on the temple, 'Everyone thinks that, you daft sod. I've never met a fag who didn't say he'd be a different kind, and never cause a trouble, and the second they get to fag-master they're waking them up at two in the morning and making them warm the bedsheets.'

'If you make me warm the bed sheets now I'll simply die,' George says, 'it must be a hundred out.'

'But you would,' says Archie, 'if I asked you?'

'... I suppose.'

'Don't worry so!' Archie says, catching his expression, and weaves his fingers between George's, 'It's so hot,' he continues, starting to pluck at his shirt cuff, 'you ought to take this off.'

'Are you asking?' George asks, laughing, but starts to unbutton it anyhow, batting away Archie's hands as he tries to loosen his cuffs at the same time. When he's shucked it entirely, Archie balls it up and flings it across the room.

George is fifteen - on his birthday in January, Archie had gotten the whole school to sing *For He's A Jolly Good Fellow* for him, and it had felt marvellous. That evening Archie had sat beside George on the bed and kissed his hands and wrists, which had been lovely, and called him Princess, which had been weird.

He doesn't feel embarrassed - he's fit enough, and doesn't have any strange birthmarks or - oh! Archie runs the flat of his palm up George's ribs, making him shiver.

'You're lovely,' Archie says, short of breath, and the back of his hair is sticking to his neck with sweat.

'You're not too bad, yourself.'

'I remember when you told me I looked like a dog -'

'A borzoi is a Russian greyhound. They're beautiful.'

Archie kisses the corner of George's mouth, long and sweet. '*You're* beautiful,' he says.

'Get off,' George laughs, '*you're* sweaty.'

'I couldn't bear to!' Archie says, and he hooks his leg over to straddle George's chest; he's eighteen, and much too heavy to be sitting on other people, and his prick is hard at the front of his dark breeches, which George chooses to ignore.

'I was just thinking,' says George, staring resolutely at the ceiling to spare Archie the shame, 'about poor Carmichael-Anstruther -'

'What?'

'Carmichael-Anstruther, from my Latin div.'

'What are you talking about?' says Archie, voice deepening, 'Stop talking nonsense just now -'

'You're crushing me -'

Archie rocks his body back so that he's sitting on George's knees. 'Stop being *fragile* and suck my stiffy, and I'll get off.'

'Hah!' says George, with a nervous laugh bubbling up through his chest, 'No, thanks.'

'"*No, thanks*?"" Archie repeats, 'I'm not playing, George.'

'Me neither!' he says, and tries to kick his legs free - not hard, but firmly enough to show that he does really want out. When the boys play the Wall Game, there's the same sort of friendly force behind their shoves. Archie doesn't give way.

'Just this once,' he says, 'to send me off.' He's sweating cobs, actually, and his wet fringe curls wildly.

'No!' says George, and the nervous laugh has just become panic - they have to keep their voices down, or what would the House Master think of two boys scrapping without shirts on?

'Just for goodbye!' Archie pleads, 'I'll be gone soon!'

'I don't want to!' says George.

'I did for my fagmaster! *I* did it! You don't get to slack off now!'

Archie grabs George's wrist in his big hand, and uses the strength that makes him such a champion bowler to push George's hand into the front of his breeches.

'Eugh!' says George, pulling his hand back so hard all the joints crack at once and backhanding Archie across the face. 'Get *off!'* he manages to shake him, and starts scrambling backwards, bucking like an overturned insect - but his hand reaches the edge of the bed, and there's nowhere else to go, and he's not fast enough to stop Archie from pouncing at him again.

'I'll scream,' says George, breathlessly, and he's terrified.

Archie's beautiful smooth face curves into a shark grin, and he places his hand right on the boniest centre of George's chest. 'Not if I scream first,' he says, and, with a firm shove that sends him sprawling, he does.

'That's filthy, Lieutenant. If you get an infection, you'll lose that hand.' George looks up from the improvised bandage, and near enough jumps out of his skin. Doctor Goodsir doesn't speak when he's hauling or on watch, and when they set up camp he usually goes into his tent and won't leave until they call out to pack up. Perhaps he'd say something to George if he visited him in the tent, but he can't bear to. Goodsir exudes a powerful disappointment where George is concerned, and he's not going to willingly subject himself to it. It's a surprise to see him, and a greater one to hear him.

'Oh,' says George, 'I've run out of clean cloth -'

'The sick tent is here for that reason, as I understand it,' says Goodsir tiredly, leading George across the rock and into the shade under the canvas. He unwraps the dirty bandage with gentle hands, and turns George's hand between his own.

'Inflamed, but it looks like you've been lucky. I'll salt this, then wrap it back up. It will sting.'

'Thank you,' says George, and he barely flinches as Doctor Goodsir pours salt into the old wound and begins the tender work of wrapping the thin bandage around it.

'Did you get this during the attack on Terror Camp?'

'In China.'

'China.' Goodsir echoes.

George watches the wrapping obscure it - 'This got me my name in *War Services Of The Lieutenants*. Well, I was a Mate back then. Well,' he says, 'what came *after* gave me my name in the *War Services*.'

Goodsir gives an impassive, slow blink. George thinks that he must not like to hear about the parts of the Navy that concern themselves with war and whathaveyou, and, with a little more thought, why would he?

'I am sorry,' says George, 'about the Lady Silence. About her friends. I - I am sorry, Doctor.'

'I know,' says Goodsir, and pinches his brow. He speaks slowly, now, and moves slowly, and everything about him seems exhausted, when he was before so bright and vital, 'I know you're sorry.'

There are times when George cannot fathom having ever been brave enough to get his name in the *War Services*. He swallows. Goodsir's other hand is still resting lightly on his wrist, almost a touch, almost warm, and then he snaps to, and ties the end of the bandage off.

'Were you very close?' Goodsir asks, 'With Lieutenant Irving?'

George nods, not trusting his voice - 'He was a brother.'

'Come back and see me when this gets soiled,' he says, pushing himself up and away from where he'd sat, 'I would hate to have to amputate here.'

Before traveling with Hickey's party, George had never seen much of Doctor Goodsir, being as they were from the opposite ships, and Goodsir not senior enough to be present at the rare officers' dinners George had spent with the Erebites. The most conversation they'd shared was on that long day, between Mister Hornby dying and Mister Blanky losing his leg to the thing.

'You must miss her very much,' says George, 'the Lady Silence, I mean. I miss my friends tremendously.'

'Yes,' says Goodsir, 'I do.'

'I wish I could have told her - that I was sorry - she never much liked listening to me, though.'

Goodsir gives his own knees a sad smile, 'She said that you spoke too fast - or, I think she was talking about you. The loud man with yellow hair... I forget the word. *Kut*... it's....'

'Yellow,' says George, and his left hand goes absent-mindedly to the top of his head-

'Don't put your hair on the bandage.'

He snatches the hand down guiltily, and twists it against his chest.

Susy the housemaid comes in early on a Sunday to keep an eye on George - though George doesn't make trouble at his Aunts' house, they feel he needs supervision. Susy turns down all of the beds while George reads upstairs, and when she dusts the old Chinese plates on the drawing room walls, George goes down with her to practise on the virginal.

'You play beautifully,' says Susy, done with her duties. She takes a seat on George's Aunts' fine upholstered chaise and taps her feet along with the music. When George is finished, she gives him a standing ovation, which makes him laugh.

'I could play you a dance,' says George, searching through his sheets, but he can't find anything suitable and ends up just improvising a few bars of discordant staccato notes.

'Not enough room to dance in here,' says Susy, 'and I suppose we ought not dance on the Lord's Day, either.'

'Oh,' says George, thoughtfully, 'I do miss my Sunday School back home. I wish Aunt Lou would bring me with - do you suppose God minds that I don't pray in His house because my aunts think me too young to go?'

'Oh master Hodgson, you ought to be glad they leave you here.'

In most respects, he is. Sunday school is really quite topping fun, but church, real church, is always puzzling for George. When the vicar says, 'let us pray' he feels directionless, and the words of his prayers seem to bounce around inside of his head and not transmit, somehow. When he cracks an eye open he sees the whole congregation deep in their personal moment with God - that he cannot seem to connect, himself. Not that his prayers go *unanswered*, for he knows that God is busy and cannot answer every whim, but that he feels them *undelivered*, and returned to sender with a big red stamp upon them. It's terrible, so terrible he has never told anyone, not even to ask what he's doing wrong, for he's quite sure that Mother and Father would be terribly disappointed in him. James often tells him, softly, that he's prayed for him.

'What do you mean?'

'Your aunts are fine women, very fine... but they do not - they're Papists.'

'Hm,' says George, not following.

'It is - Heresy, master Hodgson.'

George quite wishes he knew what Heresy meant. He purses his lips.

'But they're Christians?' he says, tapping a few keys.

Susy seems to have noticed his confusion, and sits further upright.

'In Olden Days,' she says, 'the Papists were always fighting the king - and that's why we fought the French, because they're Papists.'

'I thought it was... Napoleon...'

'Napoleon was a Papist!' she exclaims, and George looks down, worried.

'What do the Papists do wrong?' he asks, and Susy flounders -

'Gold - witchcraft -'

Witchcraft seems simply *awful* - and very much unlike his aunts, but then, they are old. 'Should I be frightened for their souls, then?'

Susy looks suddenly stricken. 'I oughtn't have said anything,' she says, getting back up to dust, 'they are marvellous women,' she reiterates, 'please, not a word of this.'

'I should, then?' says George, panicked - but Susy doesn't reply, and she still hasn't told him what Heresy is. When Aunt Lou and Aunt Kate return from their Papist Church he checks them surreptitiously for signs of wrongdoing; they give nothing away. Perhaps the problem is that they, like him, have their prayers stuck inside them, rattling around like loose money. Perhaps the Heresy is finding a way to let them out.

It's a lonely journey with the mutineers. At times, George feels like he's imagined the fifty-odd men who must be marching south with Captain Crozier - at times, George feels like he's imagined Captain Crozier. They travel in the wake of the main party, collecting what they drop like vultures, and the only times they see other people beyond the fifteen or so their world has shrunk to is when Mister Hickey forces them to excavate the shallow and hastily-covered graves along the sledge tracks. George misses out on the last of the exhumations by sheer chance, strapped into the harness while they pass the grave robbing party. When they set up camp, Hickey hands out the spoils.

'Hullo, Lieutenant,' says Gibson, dragging himself to the bench set up near the stove. He looks worse every day, face sunken and eyes hollow, his hair falling out in clumps. He's the only man who still calls George *Lieutenant* as though it's a title, or an honour. The way Des Voeux says it, *Lieutenant* may as well be his Christian name.

'Call me George,' says George, struck by the need to hear it - his Christian name, when the only person who's called him George in months has been himself. He's known Gibson five years now, journeyed with him to the ends of the Earth, and doesn't that mean something? Gibson's tired face barely stretches into surprise.

'Hullo... George,' he says, then sticks out his hand. 'Billy.'

'Hullo Billy,' says George, giving the proffered hand a firm shake. Gibson's fingers are blue-tipped, and the worn yarns of their gloves felt together with even that small movement.

'Lieutenant,' says Gibson, after he's pulled his glove free, 'George, we just found a grave - it's McBean. I know you liked him and - thought you'd want to know.'

George had liked him, though he can't say that knowing that he's dead has brought him any pleasure.

'Thank you,' he says, and tries to remember where McBean had slept, back in the Officer's cabins - Mister Blanky had been next to John, and McBean had been back with Hornby and Thomas, he thinks. By God, he misses the ship; the groaning timbers, the draughty door to his cabin with its lumpy mattress, tripping over Neptune in the Great Cabin.

'Do you recall,' says George, 'how he shouted when Neptune slept in his bed?'

'I recall how *you* shouted,' says Gibson, his dry mouth cracking into a smile.

'I never,' says George, though they had all, at one point, shouted about Neptune sleeping in their beds, 'it wasn't about him sleeping, it was about his *hair*.'

Gibson's laugh is weak, rattling like the shale they stand on - 'I'm still finding his hair in my things - you've got one -' he reaches over to take the piece of dog fur he's spotted from George's shoulder; an odd reflection of how he'd fix his epaulettes. How could that have been less than a half-dozen months ago? Gibson's once-sure fingers are clumsy - he misses the hair four or five times before losing sight of it entirely and bringing his hand back empty, embarrassed.

'Do you suppose the Captain's party still has my epaulettes?' George asks, eyes fixed on his own shoulder, and brushes at where Gibson had touched. He'd paid for them himself, so he'd rather like to keep them - and should he die here, he would like to die with them on.

'If you'll pardon me saying so, sir -' George gives his best approximation of a glare, '- George - the Captain's party brought anything that wasn't nailed down, so I expect so. If we cross paths, you can go back to them. They'd take you.'

'What I wouldn't give,' says George, 'to be with that other party. When we see them again, you can come with me. I'll vouch for you.'

'Why?' says Gibson, as though he were speaking to an especially slow child, 'What possible reason - what have I done to earn your word? Either now, or in '44, '45 -'

'I want to help you.'

'You're not a Captain,' Gibson says, 'and when we see a Captain, he'll have me strung up for my part in this. My place is here.'

'You don't know the Captains,' says George, 'if they'd take me back, they'll take you too. They'll forgive you.'

'Then I don't want it.'

George's family send packets of letters to Aunt Lou and Aunt Kate every week, detailing the various cures and countries they visit. Mother always writes a long and soppy note to George, and James writes a short and silly one, illustrating the funny characters he sees in the baths and the countryside, the donkey-handlers and the peasant dancers, the terrible company and the worse food. The family pass through Belgium and visit Mother's aunts, with whom George's sister Christina has been living for a number of years now, and then Christina sends him letters, too, addressed to *him*, *Mr G H Hodgson*, which is terrifically novel.

Georgie, she writes, *I had no idea that you were in the countryside* - and then lists off the variety of mischiefs she had gotten herself into when she'd stayed out in Oxfordshire. Christina, Aunt Lou says, is *silly* , which must have come from Mother's side of the family, because Hodgsons are very serious people.

Father writes letters to his aunts that George is not allowed to read, so he waits until they've secreted themselves away for their terrible church, until Susy has left him to tidy the bedsheets, and snatches them from the dresser. Father's letters are very long, and terribly serious. Father writes of swollen joints and fevers, of blood-spotted sputum, memory-loss, pains that wake his poor James in the night. He writes of letters to other cures, in France, in Spain, in Poland, of the dreadful carriage rides to and from these places, and of Mother crying herself to sleep. The first weekend of August, Aunt Lou and Aunt Kate recieve a letter from Father that opens,

I am ashamed to tell you that Rachael and I have had the most Explosive argument of our marriage.

George has never heard his parents argue at all, and the very idea of one *explosive* is truly appalling. He almost puts the letter down there, but he is very good at reading, and so the words tunnel right into his brain before he can stop them,

James is much improved from last week - though he complains of his whey, the pains in his chest have not been so intense. However, his Doctor Wiśniewski has put the dreadful idea that he is dying into Rachael's mind. She expressed to me her wish to bring him Home to Die and I am afraid I was quite stern with her - I refuse to give up on my son. I fear there has been a mistranslation; we converse in French here, and Doctor Wiśniewski is the worst of all of us for speaking it. I do wish to stay here longer, but Wiśniewski has put such a fright into Rachael that I long to rid myself of him, specifically.

Rachael continues, telling me that James wishes to see George again before he dies, and has told her so. She tells me that George will be Distressed not to see his brother - I reply that George is the least of our worries, and she tells me he will soon be all *of our worries, and that Dragging James across Europe is only making him Miserable in his Last Days. I raised my voice at her then, and she locked the door behind her when she retired.*

We have not spoken since last night, and I fear she has been Stewing on these dreadful thoughts. This stress has brought out the worst in us - please continue to pray for our son.

Placing the letter back into the bureau is so much harder with such shaky hands, and climbing the stairs is an effort with wobbly knees. At his Aunt's house, he has no toys, only books full of sad stories, and not a one of them is a comfort against the distant thunder of his parents fighting and his brother dying out in Poland.

Each camp they make lasts longer, and is closer to the last. George knows enough about mathematics to figure that at the rate they're going, they'll be stopped indefinitely by August, moving only inches at a time. Des Voeux must have calculated this too, though it doesn't seem to phase him. The party has become, just as Hickey predicted, Weak and Weird.

Gibson goes into the sick tent, and Hickey goes in after him, and comes out, and goes back in, and comes back out again, and Gibson, Billy Gibson, the closest thing George has to a friend at the camp, does not.

George touches the tent flap, feather-light, but even that tiny movement is enough to alert Goodsir, who says 'Don't!', and George takes his hand away.

'Doctor Goodsir,' says George, 'is Mister Gibson in there?' he knows his voice is distinctive enough, but still adds, 'It's Lieutenant Hodgson.'

'Don't come in!' says Goodsir, and then, less forceful 'Don't come in.'

George waits a moment, listening to Goodsir whimper, and makes a decision.

'I'm coming in,' he says, parting the tent flap, and finds Goodsir crouched, clutching at Gibson where he sits on the low stool, a coat slung awkwardly over his shoulders.

'Are you both quite well?' says George, and Goodsir mutters something that sounds like no, no, no -

'I'll - I'll give Mister Gibson a hand, then,' says George, and Goodsir makes a miserable, tearful sound, and lets go of Gibson, who topples from the stool like a stack of books.

Gibson's coat slides off, and the back of his striped steward's shirt has bloomed red in the centre.

'I tried,' says Goodsir, 'I tried, I *tried* -'

George can understand that.

The now-Commander Fitzjames that George meets at the port seems... a different man, though how so George can't quite put his finger on. He's still jovial, animated and outgoing, but something about his mein no longer conveys that desperate, compulsive need to be liked

that George now realises he had, that George still can't help but impress on everyone around him himself.

'Good show!' he says when he spots him, and claps George's shoulder as he presents him to another Officer - Lieutenant Le Vesconte, who George remembers from a brief crossing of paths in China. 'Hodgson, this is Lieutenant Le Vesconte -'

'We've met.' says George, and Le Vesconte gives a narrow-eyed appraising look before cracking a shy smile.

'Nice to meet you again, Lieutenant.'

'And you!' says George, simply thrilled to bits - Fitzjames gives them both a fond smile, and says 'Taking the wind from my sails a bit, gentlemen!'

'You're going to be on Terror,' says Fitzjames, when Le Vesconte excuses himself, 'with Captain Crozier.' and George frowns - 'Now don't take on, you'll be third in command there; it's a business of seniority; Sir John wants Gore, and I want Dundy, and Captain Crozier *doesn't want* Fairholme. It'll be good, it'll be *fun,* you've met Irving, haven't you?'

George has met Irving, on the *Excellent* again. He's an odd fellow - two years George's senior and two years his junior in rank; deeply pious, in a way that makes George feel shallow and incomplete.

'Lovely chap,' he says.

'And your friend Peglar will be there, too,' Fitzjames continues, either oblivious to George's discomfort or actively ignoring it, 'I'll let you deal with the Seamen sign ons - ABs only, is the word from *'pon high*,' he laughs, 'you know how to make a man feel at ease - everyone knows about your memory for faces.'

'Everyone?' says George, a little dreamily, and then snaps himself out of it - 'I meant to ask you, sir, about the stewards -' and Fitzjames smiles breezily through his request.

'I recommended you; I daresay there's space for you to recommend someone.'

Terror is not the ship George had expected, nor the company - bitter, reticent Captain Crozier and dull, stolid Lieutenant Little are not great company, and they also don't seem to like him - twice, he goes to the sick bay with a perfectly ordinary headache, simply because he wants some conversation - and Doctor Peddie manages the whole interaction, diagnosis to treatment, in about six words.

Little chuckles mechanically at Crozier's attempts at wry observation - Commander Fitzjames' monogrammed boots seem to have stuck in his craw, and he uses any chance to deride them, but once or twice George has opened his eyes while Irving drones on his Lord's Prayer over their meals and caught Captain Crozier's own bored stare. He'd call that a connection. Either way, he's glad to have Gibson there - he's a good fellow, even if he, too, is quiet.

To his mother and father, he writes, *I am third in command on Terror; Lieutenant Little is sure to be made Commander before we return, and I will then make First Lieutenant. We work together well. My love and wishes for your health.*

To Christina, he writes, *I have been quite Swindled by the Commander Fitzjames. No-one here talks, and I am going quite mad. The ship's dog is Marvellous Company.*

They've been carrying Gibson's body with them for days now, laid in state on top of the sled in his coat, and George doesn't like to think about the whys of such a thing. *I really believed him quite in love with me*, he thinks, and can only hope that that's what it is, that Hickey wants to find a better burial spot - an entirely hollow hope, as he's well aware of why Gibson is dead, and who killed him, but then, people do strange things for love, don't they? Des Voeux takes off his improvised turban and uses it to cover Gibson's face, the entire party becoming an impromptu hearse and convoy - it seems dreadfully disrespectful.

'I don't like it,' says Manson - Gibson's body has really upset him; when he swaps out of harness he walks ahead of the party so not to see it, and he has twice asked Hickey if they could have a funeral. He'd been touched, George knows, by Morfin's back outside of the Terror Camp, though George doesn't like to think about Morfin's burial - it had been his downfall.

He's exhausted by the time he, Hartnell and Manson have completed their trek back to Terror Camp from Morfin's grave, a half-mile out. It had felt a long night, and the sun had started rising again by the time the body was safely stowed in the stores tent. He'd barely caught a wink of sleep after all the commotion. He sends Hartnell and Manson off, takes a brief rest before he'll go to find command, and is startled to attention by Caulker's Mate Hickey.

'Have you heard about - Lieutenant Jopson?' asks Mister Hickey.

'What?' says George, with a puzzled frown, because he hasn't -

'I heard Lieutenant Little and Lieutenant Irving talking about it - how Crozier and Fitzjames made a show of it -'

'*Captain* Crozier,' says George, '*Commander* Fitzjames.'

'Yes,' says Hickey, and he looks troubled. George is about to ask him what's worrying him when he says, 'Lieutenant, could we speak privately?'

'Of course, Mister Hickey,' and Hickey takes off through the maze of tents to his own, forcing George to follow, and once inside, Sergeant Tozer is also there.

'Sergeant Tozer is here as a witness for me,' says Hickey before George can ask him to leave, 'not that I don't trust you, sir, but I've been misunderstood before. We'd best keep our talk low.'

'Very well,' says George - Tozer has procured a chair for him, and then Hickey starts on a wild conspiracy theory; Morfin, sick with something other than scurvy, Doctor Goodsir and the Captain keeping secrets from the crew - keeping secrets from *him*, the Goldner tins; poisoned, making them weak, making them weird. In that moment there is no-one weirder than Mister Hickey, cross-legged like a child, toying with his knife. There is no-one weaker than George, watching him, bemused.

Hickey continues, some nonsense about hunting and meat, and he looks to Tozer, who shifts his hand upon his rifle; the sound is conspicuous, and at George's feet is flung a bag full of -

'Who is that?'

'Who?' says Hickey, barely choking back a laugh, but - the inside of the bag looks terribly like - how Morfin's head had burst like an overripe marrow, and it was Tozer who'd shot him, and though there's no way they could have reached the grave after the funeral party - he'd been unattended in the stores tent all night, and he -

'Lieutenant Hodgson, it's not a *man.*'

George is sure that Hickey and Tozer can see the wheels turning behind his eyes; Good God, but he's *tired*, and he still doesn't know what *Lieutenant Jopson'*s all about -

'Though it did belong to one.'

Oh. Oh no.

He can barely keep the panic from his voice - 'What have you *done*?'

Hickey ploughs on - wild-eyed and greasy-haired, his pupils blown in the dim light, attempting to justify eating the dog meat or - selfishly keeping a secret just as he'd accused the Captain of doing, speaking directly to George as though he is different to the other officers in this regard, as though he'll say anything but -

'God, blind me. You've made a mistake, Mister Hickey. This dog was our alarm against the creature!'

'It broke its front leg -' Hickey argues, defending the murder - the felicide? No, that's cats - six months ago George could have told you the precise word for murder of a dog, and where it came from; come to think of it, what had happened to Erebus' Fagin? There'd still been plenty rats -

'I'm not asking you to believe me about that.'

'What *are* you asking me?'

And what he's asking is - *we're going to mutiny; join us.* In George's bruised mind, dizzy with exhaustion, a plan is forming - not a strong one, but a plan nonetheless, one to redeem him in the eyes of Captain Crozier, who'd excluded him from this morning's meeting. This problem has presented itself to George just at the same time, and he will handle it. Subtly. He is altogether over and done with unsubtle punishments.

He says, 'I'm not a Captain,' which means *I'm not a threat*, and, 'I'm not made of that,' which means *I can't condone this*.

'You can be whatever you need to be now,' says Hickey, which simply isn't true. Were George whatever he needed to be, he'd sprout wings. Tozer's long rifle is still delicately crossing the doorway, a threat both mild and wildly disproportionate to the matter at hand. George has always thought Sergeant Tozer a rather upright fellow - watching him trade incomprehensible looks with Mister Hickey under his scruffy hair is changing that opinion.

'What I have to tell you next is going to stamp out most of the hope you've been given,' Hickey finishes, and Tozer takes up the tale.

'Lieutenant Fairholme's rescue party are dead.'

'What? That's - you need to tell the Captains, then -'

'I did, Lieutenant. Me and Morfin... we found 'em all lined up, and Captain Crozier just swore us to secrecy. Must've been what tipped Morfin over the edge -'

'Is that what he meant, " *Put me with the others* "?'

'Yessir. That thing must've laid them out for us -'

'On the ice?'

'Yessir, but -'

'Then the thing must have gotten them not long after they left us. We - you and I, Sergeant, we fired the cannon at it last year, months later, no-one's seen it since -'

'- that's not the point, sir.' Hickey interrupts, 'The point is the false hope we've been given -'

'- I -' George says, quite unable to put into words that that's *leadership* - if he were standing he'd be swaying; he must be swaying as it is, because Sergeant Tozer says, 'Perhaps you ought to get some rest, sir,' and leads him out of the tent and into his own, where he quite collapses -

- And is woken from his nightmare by John wrenching the tent flaps apart and beaming the Arctic sun across his face.

'Is it eight bells already?'

"Fraid so,' says John, 'was a real shame you had to miss the meeting. You and I are off hunting.'

'Oh, good,' George says, rubbing his eyes. He ought to have worn the goggles this morning - had Morfin been this morning? He's having quite a time separating his dreams from what had really happened - had he been in the tent with Mister Hickey? Had *that* been today? John reaches out an arm to pull him up from the ground, and flicks a smile at him. How odd,

George thinks, how they've all changed, and now he couldn't be gladder to have John as a friend.

'Neptune's run off,' says John, which tickles at George's brain, 'I think he'd make a great hunting companion,'

Oh.

The word for murder of a dog is *Canicide.*

'I've found something,' says Mister Hickey, with the tone he always uses to tell them of something dreadful, 'come with me, Mister Hodgson.'

Aunt Kate had sometimes fed a tortoiseshell-patterned cat that visited the back door of their country house, which would hiss and scratch and leave vole legs on the doorstep, and if it had spoken, George imagines it would have said 'I've found something.'

George says, 'We ought not disturb another grave, Mister Hickey,' because that's what he always says about disturbing graves, and why Hickey makes him do it. George doesn't know what Hickey would do if he'd refuse, but he doesn't care to find out.

'Don't worry, Mister Hodgson!' says Hickey in his so-nearly sincere, comforting tone, 'Soon enough they'll run out of men, so there won't be graves to disturb!'

'That's not very -' George starts, but stops talking to observe Hickey crawling about the shale. There's a corner of greyed blanket just visible, sticking out between rocks just paler than it - invisible to almost anyone, invisible to the point of *deliberateness*.

'We really ought not,' says George again, watching Hickey snuffle around the makeshift tomb like a truffling sow, brushing rocks out and away from the blanket, revealing the sack nestled into the gravel like a medal in its velvet-lined box. He slices the chunky stitches holding it closed, but even he recoils at the body within.

Commander Fitzjames is a study in grey and green within his blanket, bruised black around the eyes and mouth. The Captain's party have forgone their sensibilities and begun to borrow from their own dead, so the Commander is dressed in only the simplest of shirts and loose breeches, the only quality piece of clothing the pretentious monogrammed boots that Captain Crozier had so derided.

'Christ,' says Mister Hickey, hooting a deranged laugh, 'look at that.'

George feels the same compulsion of the arm Aunt Lou must have felt when he said "*Good gosh*", but Hickey is too far away to strike, so all he can do is give a desperate plea - 'We need to cover him back up.'

'In time, Lieutenant!' says Hickey, crouching back onto his haunches to begin prising Commander Fitzjames' boot from his foot.

'For God's sake, Mister Hickey!' says George, feeling his gorge rise, 'leave the man alone.'

'Is this a man?' Hickey asks, indicating with the knife in a way that would be incidental for any other man. He'd get more leverage on the boot if he put it down. 'Any longer, I mean?' The knife wobbles between Hickey's fingers again - it's ivory-handled, from the spare Wardroom set that George knows were left aboard because he'd set Mister Genge the task of emptying their box so it could be broken up by the carpenters.

'Cover his face, at least.' says George. He's ten paces away and will not approach, not even to give the Commander that last, simple bit of dignity. Hickey tucks Fitzjames' hair behind his ear with an odd tenderness, and sets back to work on the boots. Even from this distance Fitzjames looks dreadful; he can't have been dead long, but he must have been sick for an age, and then George recalls: a single musket ball, the size of a cherry. He'd *been* there.

His own war wound, hot and wet on his palm, seems a trifle now, though it always had done, in truth. To have your name in the Gazette as *slightly wounded* - less a thrill than an embarrassment, to think his father had read that. When Doctor Stanley had washed and wrapped his hand back on *Cornwallis* he'd muttered, '*silly boy*'. The longer they're out on the wastes of King William, the more George understands why Doctor Stanley had done what he'd done at the Carnivale. It takes bravery, of a kind that he'd never especially had. The impulsive courage he'd had in spades has abandoned him now, or perhaps he's abandoned *it*.

The next Sunday morning, Aunt Lou wakes George up at some terrible bright hour, and tells him he must dress quickly. Susy has gone to Chichester to see her mother, and George is too young to be kept in the house alone. He must go to the Church with her and Aunt Kate. She knows he is a good boy, she says, it will not be long, and on Monday she will give him a farthing to buy lemon sweets at the village shop.

He's so frightened, worrying at his round-collared blouse as his aunts shephard him into the Papist church to witness the Heresy, his hands so wet with sweat that they leave marks on his clothes. 'There's nothing to be afraid of,' says Aunt Kate, but the first thing they see in the vast stone hall is the huge painted statue of poor Jesus upon the cross, which is scary indeed. He tries to hide his eyes, but with an aunt on each side his hands are gently moved down.

'It's alright to be sad,' Aunt Kate whispers, 'he died for us, but do you see how he's smiling?'

The serene twist of the lips on Jesus' painted face might, he supposes, pass for a smile. George nods.

'Do you like the organ music?' she asks - he nods again, and then she stills him with a hand on his shoulder as the golden cross comes past them, carried by the choir. Aunt Lou moves his hand in its shape for him. The procession continues - he wants to crane his neck and see - the lace, the jewels, he doesn't understand a thing he's seeing. The old priests - he assumes they're priests? - bob prayers at the front, and then the singing starts.

It's like nothing else he's ever heard - the low hum of the men and the higher notes of the boys, harmonies reverberating in his mind and stomach and heart, and it is beautiful. Aunt

Lou squeezes his hand on his left, and he squeezes back. This must be what you hear when you die and go to heaven, George thinks, this must be how the angels speak.

Often, in the church his parents had taken him to, he'd become bored. The vicar would drone on and on, each word duller than the last, and the songs were so clumsy, and George would sit, counting the ticks of his father's watch in his waistcoat until he could go to Sunday school. This service is *gripping*, even when the priest steps to the pulpit and marches through what must be a hundred thousand Latin words that George has never heard before. The cool air has become sweet with incense, dizzying. The priest returns to the altar under Jesus' calm, sad gaze, and the white-smocked boys and men join him, and the congregation begin to move, snaking around the pews. George wraps his hand tight in Aunt Lou's skirt and follows them.

The man leans down to him after he passes the bread to Aunt Lou, and says, 'Only if you're compelled,' and George *is* compelled. Amazingly, despite all these years of his prayers going unsent, despite all this time - he steps forward, and the wafer - the body of Christ - is placed upon his tongue, and he's not sweating anymore, he's not scared - and the singing continues, and Aunt Kate smiles like she's proud and finally he's made someone proud, and he thinks of poor James in Poland with his joints sore and swollen and his chest paining him and his lungs full of blood like Christ's that the priest drinks before them and he prays to the Papist God, not dissimilar to the Church of England God he'd known before, and his prayer connects like lightening torching a tree and he thinks, God, cure my brother, and for a moment he is whole, perfect.

On Monday, Aunt Kate gives him a farthing for lemon sweets, and Aunt Lou buys him a wooden top. They do not speak about the moment in the church, when George is sure he must have alit with holy connection. It's overwhelming.

That night he slides into his bed and weeps, and he doesn't know if it's because his prayer sent or because they had never before. The next Sunday, Aunt Lou wakes him by brushing his hair from his face, and he says 'I think I'm sick.'

'Sick,' says Aunt Lou, her long face pale, and the morning sunlight catches on her old ladies' whiskers, 'how so?'

'My chest,' says George, and he coughs, unconvincingly, keeping his eyes half-closed. Aunt Lou brushes his forehead and says, 'Perhaps the walk would freshen you up?'

'No!' says George, too quickly, gives another few weak coughs and rolls onto his face.

'Oh,' says Aunt Lou, one hand still on his shoulder, and he can feel it: warm through his cambric nightshirt. She rubs his back, then gets up very slowly, obviously waiting for him to spring up, which he will not do.

Aunt Lou leaves, and stands just outside of his doorway muttering to Aunt Kate - he can only catch snatches; *pretending* - *unlike* - *really?* - *frightened* - well, the last of those is certainly true, not that he can articulate it as such. Since last Sunday, none of his nighttime prayers have had the same electric effect, even when he imagines the gold and the jewels and Jesus looking down upon him. He tries a sip of Aunt Kate's wine at dinner, and creeps into the

pantry in the dead of night for breadcrumbs which also do nothing. He doesn't know what's happening - he knows his aunts pray at night and has never seen them troubled by it; suppose the Papist priest is really casting spells on them - suppose even the Papist God doesn't want him. Well, if that's the case, he doesn't want to know.

When he rolls over and cracks an eye again, he sees his aunts standing side-by-side in the doorframe in their dour dresses - Aunt Lou brushes her hand over it as she leaves, and Aunt Kate says, 'We'll see you at noon, George.'

The Captain's party has set up camp again, so their miserable band of malcontents do the same. Tozer and Armitage carry Gibson off of the sledge and carefully into Goodsir's sick tent. Hickey, marching between the tarpaulins laid out on the ground in his stolen oversized boots, winks at George and Goodsir as they put them up together, in silence. Tozer comes and marches Goodsir away, and George is alone. Once the tents are up, George sits down on an overturned Goldner crate just outside the invisible perimeter of the camp and sighs.

Inside the tent, the conversation becomes heated, and finally Hickey storms out, grabbing Des Voeux by the arm, and both of their bored gazes slide over George as though he were something unpleasant. Hickey tears across the camp, giving George an uncanny smile the whole time, and ducks into his own tent, with Tozer following from the sick tent after a moment.

'Alright, Lieutenant?' says Des Voeux, sidling up, 'I've not seen much of you lately.'

Des Voeux is another character that George had thought quite highly of until recently, another acquaintance from the *Excellent* . He'd thought him *dry* - he's now realised that his sarcasm is a weak cover for actual cruelty.

'No,' says George, 'I suppose not.'

'And you're keeping well?'

'Given the circumstances.' He'd lost another tooth while putting the tents up, and hadn't even bothered to look at it before spitting it out. His feelings on getting back have downgraded from *When* to *If*, lately, and *If* they return to England, the dentures he's going to need will set him back a fortune.

'Something troubling you?' asks Des Voeux, 'You're usually more prone to... loquaciousness.'

It's things like *loquaciousness* that make George think that Des Voeux's blunt vowels are an affectation; probably a good one, and so old he's forgotten it's the case, but with enough tells to tip him off that Charles Des Voeux had, as he'd once heard Mister Blanky put it, *been born with the silver spoon so far in his mouth it'd come out his arse*.

He's not very tall, Des Voeux, but it's an unpleasant feeling to be sitting while he stands, sneering and ferretlike, knocking his boot against George's crate.

'Speak up,' says Des Voeux, kicking harder at the box - he looks and sounds a schoolyard bully.

'There's nothing to say,' says George, tightly, and Des Voeux snaps - 'Then move.'

'I'm not troubling any of you, here.'

Des Voeux grabs George's arm, and tugs him from his perch 'Stand *up*, Lieutenant,'

'Get - what are you doing? You'll break my hand that way!'

'Leave him be! Leave him *be* -' Goodsir screams from the sick tent, and Des Voeux does let go; not entirely, but no longer bending his fingers backward - 'Give me *forty minutes*!'

'Twenty,' says Des Voeux.

'Thirty.'

'Fifteen,' says Des Voeux.

It happens like this: George, on the floor, hawking desperately wheezy breaths, winded from his fall from the bed. Archie, screaming bloody murder as he calmly collects up his shirt and jacket, and Housemaster Wallis sees what Archie wants him to see - despite Archie having three years and three stone and almost half a foot on George - because Archie is beautiful, and because his father is the MP for Reading.

George sits in the carriage with his trunk between his feet and the letter from the Headmaster in his hand, and he manages not to cry. He's managed not to cry the whole time, even in the Headmaster's office, even when Housemaster Wallis had thrown his trunk down the stairs at Godolphin, even when the driver had stopped the cab to have a piss.

His first thought is that he should go to Christina in France. Christina would take him in; he'll take the train from London to Portsmouth or Dover, then a ship to Calais, then on to Paris - but he has no money, and so he has to go home.

The trunk is heavy as he drags it up the steps to his parents' townhouse, a penitent's cross. He stands at the door for five full minutes, straightening his hair, his jacket, then raps at the door.

It's Mother who answers, and it takes her half a moment to realise it's her own son there. 'George!' she says, 'What are you doing home?'

And George only then begins to cry - hand extended with the letter which she reads with her hand over her mouth. Father has extracted himself from his office, and joins them at the door, a thundering cloud of a human being.

'What does this mean, George?' he asks, 'What does this *mean*?' but George is crying too hard to get a single word across.

'Don't shout at him!' says Mother, looping an arm about his shoulder, 'Oh my poor boy, what happened?'

'"Improper Conduct"?' Father is shouting - it's evening, and a dog a few houses down begins to bark, 'What the Devil is "Improper Conduct"? I thought we raised you better, George, than to misbehave in class -'

'I didn't misbehave!' George sobs -

'Well then I ought to write your headmaster!'

'No! I - I - I -'

'Don't stammer,' says Father - 'Stop shouting at him, Henry!' says Mother - 'I - I - I - I -' says George.

'Well,' says Father, 'if you're expelled you'd best take off your school things -' '- *Henry!* -' '- you look like you've been in a brawl!'

'I - I - I was!'

'What?'

'I-In a b-bbbrawl, in a-a-a fight!'

'In a fight?' Father shouts - the dog at number nine starts barking again.

George is exhausted. He slumps against Mother, still sobbing, and she guides him upright with a hand on his shoulder and steers him upstairs while Father complains from the drawing room.

'You can tell me what happened.' says Mother, though he can't, 'Who did you fight?' George is back to hiccupping, and doesn't reply.

'Are they important?' she asks, and when she goes to help him with his collar he flinches back from her -

'I'll be downstairs shortly,' he says, or tries to, but his face is so tight and hot he thinks he might die before he gets back downstairs.

All of the clothes in his dresser are old and too short for him now; Mrs Kendall at Godolphin had to let down all his hems in March, and added new ones in May, and there isn't a piece here that's had such treatment. He looks ridiculous.

Mother and Father are arguing downstairs; George can hear them. Mother's voice doesn't carry as well, and she sounds like a shrill buzz over Father's angry baritone. It's the money that they're arguing about; George's tuition fees at Eton, and what they'll do with him now.

'I'll pay you back,' says George, the moment he gets into the room, 'I'll get a job and pay it back straight away,' and Father pinches his brow in the very picture of despondency.

'What can you do, George, that will make money?'

'I'll go to sea! I could have my commission in... in six years. Perhaps I could speak to.... your cousin Robert, or -'

'- My cousin Robert?'

'Yes! If I had a recommendation to midshipman I could -'

'My cousin Robert was decapitated by cannon fire at Trafalgar.'

'I -'

'Your brother,' says Father, 'dreamed of his days at Eton, and he never got them. Why God saw fit to leave me with -'

'Henry!' Mother shrieks -

'*Fine*,' says Father, 'I will secure you a recommendation to midshipman; I want you out of my *sight*.'

'Your father doesn't mean those things he said,' Mother tells him later, smoothing her hand over George's head like she were petting a cat, though George's father really *does* mean those things.

'He's simply had a shock. He loves you,' she says, 'He's proud of you, no matter what you do.'

Even later, when Mother has long retired to bed, Father stands in the doorway of George's dark bedroom with his candle and says, 'What would you call a man who loses almost six hundred pounds on a fight?'

George says nothing, pretending to sleep.

'I'd call that man a fool,' Father says, 'now, what would you call a man who loses *another man's* six hundred on a fight? A criminal?'

George says nothing, cracking an eye open. His father is limned by the candlelight, his bald head and ginger eyebrows shining like a floating orange skull.

'Well,' he says, 'you won't make your fortune on the stage.'

There's no discussion of it; Goodsir dumps two sacks in the centre of the camp, and from those two tin plates of... meat are laid out at the table, and every man creeps out of his hole towards them, positioning themselves around Hickey and the... the meat. George stays sat on his crate for as long as he feels he possibly can, until the weird animal urge of body is so much stronger than his weak, weak mind, and he staggers forward.

'Oh! I saved this for you,' says Hickey, slapping a piece of very dark... meat onto a barely-chipped willow-patterned wardroom plate, giving the most appalling little smirk, 'Billy always spoke so highly of you, Lieutenant.'

It's torture, very carefully orchestrated, because at any other time and place Hickey's men would have to tie him down and beat him up to break his resolve on this, but here and now it's served to him on porcelain, like a gift, and he takes it, back with him to the crate, sits down with it upon his knees, and eats it of his own volition.

There's no dignity in starving to death - how his body has become pathetic and frail and alien to him, and how every thought and memory now turns toward what he most lacks like a leaf to the sun, full of jealous fury at his past self for things he didn't eat; sitting quietly over dinner with his parents while James lies on his deathbed a room over (picking brussels sprouts apart leaf by leaf and spreading them about the plate) - laughing with his classmates (stirring Eton's eponymous Mess into a uniform colour and consistency) - walking in the woods with his aunts (plants ripe with blackberries, wild strawberries and bilberries, too small to be worth picking) - Mother's garden (sour grapes on the trellis) - telling John and Edward anecdotes in the wardroom (roast beef gone cold as he gestures with his fork) -

The - the *meat* is tough; if he slices it as small as possible he can swallow it whole like a pill to quell the ringing bell in his mind that *this is a man, this is a man* - but he can't honestly say that if his brain rebelled in disgust he wouldn't eat his own vomit off of the rock.

The other men chew on, mechanically - besides Hickey, who is taking slow bites, savouring each one. George doesn't think this can be his first taste of it. When he calls out to Doctor Goodsir, almost joyful, he gets no reply. George takes another sliver off of his plate into his mouth, and tries to imagine anything but what he's experiencing now.

Mother and Father arrive, unannounced, the last week of August - haggard, pale and defeated. 'Oh George, you've grown!' says Mother. Father says, 'You've been feeding him too much red meat, Auntie.'

'Shh!' says Mother, and she crouches down despite her big skirts and kisses George's face. She smells just like he remembers, of the sweet perfume from the orange bottle on her bureau.

'Is James with you?' George asks, nervously, reaching up to tangle one of her pale curls in his fist, and Mother nods.

'He's resting in the cab.'

'Is he well?'

Mother doesn't answer.

'Wouldn't you all like to stay here tonight?' Aunt Kate asks, and Father blusters on -

'No, no thank you, Auntie, we've already paid the cabby. George, do you have your luggage?'

George shrugs, and Aunt Lou says, 'George, why don't you go and see your brother while we pick up your luggage?' and George fairly runs away.

James looks so dreadful he makes their parents look in the very rose of health - shrunken, like an old man, his clothes so loose they may as well be empty - aside from his knees, swollen so his stockings look like they have a Christmas orange in each.

'Hullo, James,' George says, and James' whole body seems to light from within for a moment.

'Georgie!' he rasps, his fine red hair whipping in the eddies of breeze, 'Did you get my letters?'

'Yes.' says George, though the James that George had seen, had imagined in those letters is nothing like the awful mummified version of his brother sitting in the cab before him, barely mobile. He's not sure how this James had ridden a donkey.

'Well, come on in,' says James, patting the bench beside him, 'I've missed you tremendously.'

'Me too,' says George, scrambling up the wooden step and onto the plush velvet interior, 'missed you, I mean. Do you feel better? Do you... are you better?'

'Improved, I'm sure,' he says, wrapping his cold, bony hand about George's, then coughs, the terrible reverberating bray of a saw through timber. George scrambles his own soft linen pockets for a handkerchief - Aunt Kate's, embroidered with roses.

'Shh,' he says, nudging it into James' hand and rubbing at his back, like he's seen Mother do, 'get it up -'

The hiccupping undercurrent of a shocked laugh comes to the cough then, and James whoops another few into the pretty border of Aunt Kate's handkerchief, staining pink about the leaves and thorns. George doesn't have another to mop at the terrified tears that have started running down his own face, sniffs, and wipes his nose with his cuffs.

'Nothing to be scared of,' wheezes James, his shaking, skinny hand going to his own pocket, removing a cotton square laundered far beyond its natural lifespan, 'just a little -' he chokes into the satin-stitch roses once more, then spits inelegantly into its centre '- just a little cough. Mine now.' he says of the handkerchief, tucking it into his pocket and pinching the ragged one of his own over George's nose, 'Now *blow*.'

'That's Aunt Kate's,' George hiccups through the cloth, sniffing -

'Blow!'

George blows, half-heartedly.

'There,' says James, resting back on the soft bench, 'I'm still *your* big brother. I take care of *you*, silly.' He has a tiny pink dribble at the corner of his mouth.

'I prayed for you,' says George.

'It's worked marvellously,' says James, and promptly dies two weeks later.

It must have been only nine or ten months ago, though it feels like an age has passed since then, that Captain Crozier, slouching, in his cups as he was in those days, his Great Cabin dark around him, had asked George, 'Do you suppose God has abandoned us, Lieutenant?'

The prayers that John had lead at dinner had seemed especially long and fervent, and George, sat at Crozier's right, opposite Edward, had felt the Captain tap his hand during them. It had been an accident - Crozier setting down his glass, empty already, but George had looked up and into Crozier's face and watched his pocked face form that dangerous sly grin with unease. It hadn't lasted, the grin, and once John was done they'd both resumed the calm and thoughtful air of a man done praying, and picked at their Goldner muck. As the stewards cleared up afterwards he'd bid the rest of the officers good night, and then said - 'George, come into the cabin, I want to talk about your report.'

George's report had not been finished; it had barely been started - he'd followed with trepidation, but the Captain had simply poured two glasses and sat at his tilted table, turned to face the tundra outside through the window, lit green by the aurora.

'Are you a faithful man, George?'

'Yes, sir -'

'But you don't pray?'

'I -' Crozier could hardly string him up for that; he'd only been able to see such a thing because he hadn't prayed either, 'I do believe, sir.'

The Captain had looked out at the ice once more, and taken a long drink, 'Do you suppose God has abandoned us, Lieutenant?'

George had pursed his lips. He hadn't known how to explain that he'd felt God's eye on him enough times to count on a finger, that God had less *abandoned* him than misplaced him among His many children at the train station, and hadn't yet noticed him missing.

'I couldn't say, sir.'

'Hm,' Crozier had said, and set George on his way. He doesn't imagine the conversation had helped either of them.

Now he stares at the canvas and his mouth still has the lingering taste of Gibson's flesh in it, and God finds him again. He couldn't explain it to an outside observer, can barely fathom it himself, that in his worst and weakest moment, nearly twenty-five years since he'd last felt it, he's touched by the divine. The inside of his eyelids sparkle with jewels and lace, and the rush of the wind at the camp around him sounds like how the angels speak.

He doesn't know what it means, just as he's never known whether what he felt before was the blessing of the Papist God or the damning of the Church of England one, whether his life had turned out as it had because he'd partaken of the body of Christ or hadn't ever again.

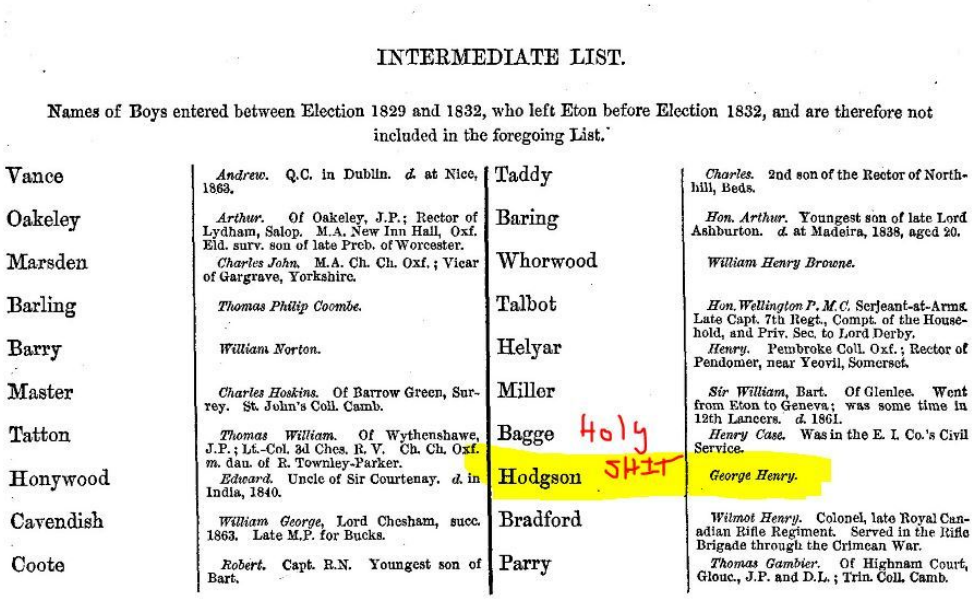
Whichever, he revels in the recognition.

this has been a LONG TIME IN THE MAKING. not as long as some of my other wips, but I've been FOCUSED and WRITING HARD and I'm *really proud* of what I've made here. Sort of a fusion of AMC canon and various historical points I've picked up along the way!

Hodgson has kindof stealthily become my favourite Terror character! He's weird! He's Terror's only ranking extrovert! He's trying his best! This is all hanging on the axis of: You can take the boy out of boarding school, but you can't take boarding school out of the boy.

A few notes:

fun fact: while researching about what Eton was like in the 1830s I discovered a name in its registers:



INTERMEDIATE LIST.

Names of Boys entered between Election 1829 and 1832, who left Eton before Election 1832, and are therefore not included in the foregoing List.

Vance	*Andrew.* Q.C. in Dublin. *d.* at Nice, 1863.	Taddy	*Charles.* 2nd son of the Rector of Northhill, Beds.
Oakeley	*Arthur.* Of Oakeley, J.P.; Rector of Lydham, Salop. M.A. New Inn Hall, Oxf. Eld. surv. son of late Preb. of Worcester.	Baring	*Hon. Arthur.* Youngest son of late Lord Ashburton. *d.* at Madeira, 1838, aged 20.
Marsden	*Charles John.* M.A. Ch. Ch. Oxf.; Vicar of Gargrave, Yorkshire.	Whorwood	*William Henry Browne.*
Barling	*Thomas Philip Coombe.*	Talbot	*Hon. Wellington P. M.C.* Serjeant-at-Arms. Late Capt. 7th Regt., Compt. of the Household, and Priv. Sec. to Lord Derby.
Barry	*William Norton.*	Helyar	*Henry.* Pembroke Coll. Oxf.; Rector of Pendomer, near Yeovil, Somerset.
Master	*Charles Hoskins.* Of Barrow Green, Surrey. St. John's Coll. Camb.	Miller	*Sir William,* Bart. Of Glenlee. Went from Eton to Geneva; was some time in 12th Lancers. *d.* 1861.
Tatton	*Thomas William.* Of Wythenshawe, J.P.; Lt.-Col. 3d Ches. R. V. Ch. Ch. Oxf. *m.* dau. of R. Townley-Parker.	Bagge	*Henry Case.* Was in the E. I. Co.'s Civil Service.
Honywood	*Edward.* Uncle of Sir Courtenay. *d.* in India, 1840.	Hodgson	*George Henry.*
Cavendish	*William George,* Lord Chesham, succ. 1863. Late M.P. for Bucks.	Bradford	*Wilmot Henry.* Colonel, late Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment. Served in the Rifle Brigade through the Crimean War.
Coote	*Robert.* Capt. R.N. Youngest son of Bart.	Parry	*Thomas Gambier.* Of Highnam Court, Glouc., J.P. and D.L.; Trin. Coll. Camb.

I couldn't find a way of telling if this George Henry Hodgson is the same as the Terror Lieutenant, but what a weird coincidence! I like to think that it is because it plays into a lot of my headcanons (historycanons??) - NOTABLY that he was born in 1817 -eyes emoji-

(ETA: I looked into this further & can tell you with roughly 99.9% confidence that this IS the same George Henry Hodgson, he WAS born in 1817, the youngest of *seven* - and that his father was ACTUALLY a CoE priest. Check this post I made about it :))

Other people in the Eton register around that time (joined after registration 1829 and left before registration 1832: probably in the school years '30-'31, '31-'32, but possibly late entries to the year '29-'30) included Captain Robert Coote (1820-1898) who married the Arctic Captain Parry's daughter; he joined the Navy in 1833, the year after G. H. Hodgson. Boys joined the school proper in the third form, when they were 13, but there were first and second forms in the 19th century for boys 11 and 12 years old - they were hived off into local prep schools.

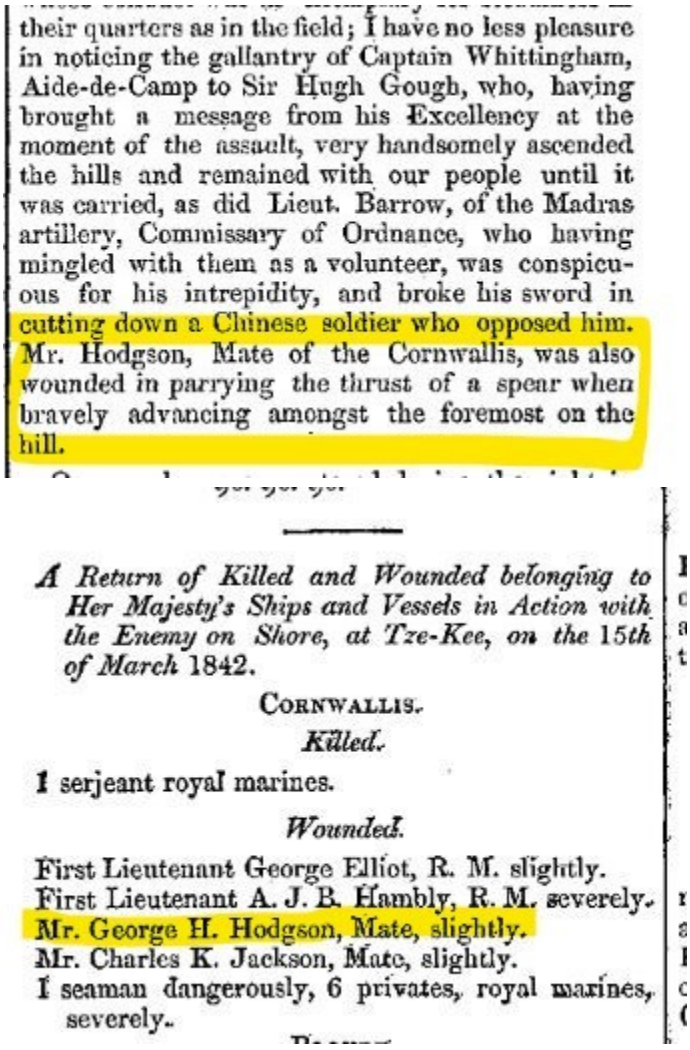
'Poor Carmichael-Anstruther' was a real guy: Sir John Carmichael-Anstruther was born 9 days after his father died; and was fatally shot in an accident at Eton in November 1831. RIP.

Trevor May's The Victorian Public School (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2011) says "The cost of keeping a boy at Eton... as calculated in July 1830 was £280... per year." That's roughly £40,000/year (nearly $50k) in modern terms; for reference, twelve years later the Navy paid its Lieutenants £180/year. Yikes.

Fagging (younger year boys acting as squires/personal servants to upper form boys) was part of the deal at boarding schools well into the 20th c - it's probably still happening even though it's been repeatedly banned because it's so open to abuse. Double yikes!

Hodgson entered the Navy in 1832; between 1840 and mid 1842 he was on the Excellent - Fitzjames joined for a few weeks in '41 before moving to the Cornwallis; and Hodgson joined him there in '42, for the first opium war.

Hodgson was noted in multiple gazettes as having been 'slightly wounded' in an encounter with the Chinese forces; he's mentioned in canto 2 of Fitzjames' Voyage of The Cornwallis as having received a 'deep cut on the hand'.



their quarters as in the field; I have no less pleasure in noticing the gallantry of Captain Whittingham, Aide-de-Camp to Sir Hugh Gough, who, having brought a message from his Excellency at the moment of the assault, very handsomely ascended the hills and remained with our people until it was carried, as did Lieut. Barrow, of the Madras artillery, Commissary of Ordnance, who having mingled with them as a volunteer, was conspicuous for his intrepidity, and broke his sword in cutting down a Chinese soldier who opposed him. Mr. Hodgson, Mate of the Cornwallis, was also wounded in parrying the thrust of a spear when bravely advancing amongst the foremost on the hill.

A Return of Killed and Wounded belonging to Her Majesty's Ships and Vessels in Action with the Enemy on Shore, at Tze-Kee, on the 15th of March 1842.

CORNWALLIS.

Killed.

1 serjeant royal marines.

Wounded.

First Lieutenant George Elliot, R. M. slightly.
First Lieutenant A. J. B. Hambly, R. M. severely.
Mr. George H. Hodgson, Mate, slightly.
Mr. Charles K. Jackson, Mate, slightly.
1 seaman dangerously, 6 privates, royal marines, severely.

He was promoted to Lieutenant in December '42, and appointed to the Wanderer with Harry Peglar and William Gibson, who was an Ordinary Seaman at the time. It's likely that Peglar or Hodgson pulled some strings to get Gibson employed as a steward.

I just realised how boring this is getting. I hope you had.... a feeling reading this. If you got this far? I love you sfm. please leave a comment, I'm babey.